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ABSTRACT

A study investigated student competitors' opinions of the practice of judges asking questions of competitors at the conclusion of speeches in the individual events competiton at forensic tournaments. Surveys were completed by 52 final round student competitors at a large midwestern university individual events invitational tournament. Results showed that students: (1) liked the process of questioning by the judge in final rounds; (2) believed questions were inappropriate during preliminary rounds; and (3) supported the idea of questioning periods at both invitational meets and national tournaments. Results further indicated students' views of the advantages and disadvantages of such questions. Advantages included demonstrating the competitor's knowledge, dedication, and preparation; allowing for clarification of material; and improving speaking skills. Disadvantages included anxiety and stress, and problems with the appropriateness and fairness of questions asked. (Three tables of data are included.) (SR)

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Competitors' Perceptions of Questions in Individual Events Rounds

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COMPETITORS' PERCEPTIONS OF QUESTIONS IN INDIVIDUAL EVENTS ROUNDS

The practice of judges asking competitors questions at the conclusion of their speeches is a common area of interest in the arena of individual events competition. The practice has been most notably used in past years in the event of rhetorical criticism at the National Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament (NFA-NIET). The practice has undergone scrutiny a number of times. The issue was addressed in 1984 when a survey of coaches found support to abolish the practice at the NFA-NIET.[1] However, a groundswell of support from the student ranks, who were in favor of the question period, saved the practice. The matter was again brought before the NFA-NIET at the 1989 coaches' meeting held at Upsula College in East Orange, New Jersey.[2] The coaches voted once again to drop the questioning period; the students, once again, expressed a desire for it to remain as part of the event. This time the coaches' position carried the day, and the option of questioning students in rhetorical criticism was abolished at the NFA business meeting held at the 1989 Speech Communication Association convention in San Francisco. The students raised their concerns for the third time at the 1990 NFA-NIET, expressing a desire for the questioning process to return to rhetorical criticism. The coaches discussed the issue and decided questioning would

remain in the past; the issue was not addressed at all at the SCA convention in Chicago.

A point which deserves attention in this issue is the opinion of the student competitor. The student voice was heard and considered in one instance (1984), circumvented the next time (1989) and virtually ignored the third (1990). While the student voice is only one of many factors which should be considered when addressing whether the question period should be part of individual events competition, it is an integral part.

Our purpose is to provide a systematic and detailed evaluation of competitors' opinions on the question period. Rather than just focusing on rhetorical criticism, this paper addresses all of the individual events, from public address to limited preparation to oral interpretation events commonly offered during the 1990-1991 competitive forensics invitational tournament season.

Method

Judges, at a large Midwestern university individual events invitational tournament, were allowed the option of asking questions during the final rounds of all events. Each competitor was questioned after they finished their speech/performance. Surveys were then distributed to the final round competitors at the completion of the round in

order to determine perceptions of the questioning process. Basic issues addressed included opinions on questions in preliminary rounds and final rounds, and the continuation of the practice at invitational and national tournaments. These responses were close-ended and were easily tabulated based on yes/no responses.

Competitors were also asked about what they considered to be the advantages and disadvantages of the practice. Content analysis was used to establish the categorization of advantages and disadvantages. Rather than use pre-set categories, this study allowed the categories to generate themselves from the data.[3] Each comment was determined to be one unit of analysis. Comments were divided into public address and oral interpretation in case the combination of one large grouping of "individual events" proved counterproductive to the analysis (i.e., some categories are inherently applicable to public address and yet not applicable in oral interpretation, and vice-versa).

A preliminary classification placed the comments into as many categories as necessary in accordance with the Berelson's (1952) perspective that categories are only limited by imagination. These categories were then collapsed, resulting in a final taxonomy of 12 categories in public speaking and 10 in oral interpretation.

The comments were coded independently by the two researchers. An initial overall agreement of 83.6 percent was achieved. Initial agreement in public address was 79.6 percent overall with 75.9 percent in advantages and 83.3 percent in disadvantages.. Oral interpretation coding was 87.3 percent overall with 87.1 in advantages and 87.5 percent in disadvantages. In order to take into account chance probability, Cohen's Kappa was also computed. Results ranged from good to excellent (advantages in public address .7091; disadvantages in public address .7899; disadvantages in oral interpretation .8439; advantages in oral interpretation .8543).[4] After computing initial levels of agreement, the coders met and resolved disagreements to the satisfaction of both individuals.

Results

The results of the survey indicated students like the judge questioning process in final rounds. Initially, the data show nearly all of the contestants were questioned by at least one judge in finals (see Table 1). In oral interpretation events, it was less likely all three judges asked questions of the competitors, but the practice was more common in public address events.

Contestants then responded to the question, "should judges be allowed to ask questions of competitors in

preliminary rounds/final rounds?" As Table 2 indicates, competitors believe questions were not appropriate in preliminary rounds, but they liked the notion of having question periods in final rounds. Chi square analysis demonstrates the significance of these findings against questioning in preliminary rounds, χ^2 (3, n = 52) = 13.69, p < .05); and for questioning by judges in final rounds, χ^2 (3, n = 52) = 13.30, p < .05).

Next, contestants were asked if judge questioning periods ought to occur at invitational meets/national tournaments. Contestants supported the idea of question periods at both types of contests (see Table 3). Chi square analysis demonstrates the significance of these findings for questioning at invitationals, χ^2 (3, n = 52) = 8.96, p < .05); and for questioning by judges at national tournaments, χ^2 (3, n = 52) = 8.38, p < .05). Two issues did not achieve an .05 level of significance. Judge questioning of oral interpretation events, while receiving majority support, was not significant at the invitational or national level.

Students were then given the opportunity to discuss all advantages and disadvantages associated with judge questioning. In terms of advantages of oral interpretation, comments were placed in five categories:

1. Demonstrates competitor's knowledge, dedication, and preparation. These responses focused on the use of

questions to prove how much a competitor knows about the pieces he/she selected, and the level of dedication and hard work put into the interpretation. Examples of comments from this category include: "it helps the judges to see if the speaker really know[s] what he/she is trying to accomplish," and "you can tell if the person researched the topic and material, or just had it handed to them."

2. Allows for clarification of material. Responses in this category dealt with the role questions play in terms of making the interpretation or selection of pieces more clear to the judges. For example, "it clarifies things for judges."
3. Improves speaking skills. In this category, contestants argued question periods help sharpen their skills of speaking in an impromptu situation. For example, "it also shows the articulation skills of the contestant."
4. Demonstrates depth of interpretation. This category comprises responses regarding competitors' abilities to interpret the literature. Examples of comments from this category include: "it can show who has really thought about their piece/character/etc. and who is just good at bringing tears up," and "finding out if comp[etitor] really knows piece, characters, etc."

5. Makes competitor work hard. The competitors also suggested that knowing they will be questioned by judges makes them work harder and be more prepared. For example, "if competitors know they will be asked questions, it makes them more aware of literature they choose and research it more in depth."

The advantages expressed by those in public address followed much the same pattern.

1. Allows for clarification of material. Competitors argued that the questioning period allows them the chance to explain complex issues. Examples from this category include: "clarification of topic significance," and "it's possible to clarify points and to make sure everyone understood the presentation."
2. Opportunity to defend decisions made in speech. Responses in this category revolved around the notion that strategies and topic selections could be supported during the question period. Examples include: "gives the speaker a chance to show some of their inner thoughts that went into their performance," and "being able to defend decision."
3. Helps judge make rank/rate decisions. This category includes comments regarding the use of questioning to aid the role of the judge. For example, "it allows further

possibility for distinction between competitors in close rounds thus making ranking easier and more fair."

4. Stresses areas in need of improvement. Students argued that questions aid the speaker in finding weaknesses in their speeches. Examples from this category include: "makes speaker . . . think about what is their speech," and "you recognize faults in your speech."
5. Improves speaking skills. Comments in this category, similar to interpretation, focused on how questioning helps a speaker improve impromptu speaking skills. For example, "for non-limited prep[aration]--teaching additional comm[unication] skills."
6. Requires that competitors know subject area. Competitors also claimed that questioning exposed those who were not familiar with the topic and encouraged speakers to be fully prepared. Examples of comments from this category include: "being forced to have thorough knowledge of event and content," "splits those who actually understand their points and those who are attempting to sound sophisticated," and "to find out that the student did the research and compiled the research themselves."

Competitors also found several disadvantages with judge questioning. In oral interpretation, the disadvantages were placed in five categories.

1. Increases anxiety and stress. Comments in this category indicated that students felt pressured by judge questioning, and that such pressure created a great deal of stress. For example, "if we are nervous, some very good competitors could be hurt," "puts the already nervous and paranoid speakers in a serious bind," and others simply stated, "too much stress," and "its very nerveracking."
2. Time. Students also believe a problem was the time involved; rounds would last longer and the tournament would run longer as well. Students simply commented, "takes up a lot of time," and "time consuming."
3. Question problems. A variety of comments centered around the idea that questions could be to complex, not very good, or that not all competitors were asked the same type or level of question. For example, "not all judges ask questions which are really good for providing insight into how well-prepared the interper is," "some questions didn't pertain to [the] story and it was frustrating to try and answer them when I didn't see the relevance," "not all are asked the same questions," and "some competitors are given easier questions and thus an advantage."
4. Not needed for oral interpretation. Comments in this category dealt with the belief that questioning was not

appropriate for oral interpretation events: "forensics is the competition of acting. How good you are--not how you can deeply deciphir [sic] a piece," "shouldn't ask them in duo or prose or DI [dramatic interpretation] but in events where students wrote speeches."

5. Interpreters not taught how to handle questions. In this category, speakers expressed their concern with having to answer difficult questions, perhaps questions that are unanswerable. Comments included: "performers may have troubling thinking clearly after an involved piece," and "competitors cannot always justify their reasons for their interpretation."

Finally, speakers articulated some disadvantages with public address question periods. Several of these categories are similar to those for oral interpretation; thus definitions and examples are provided only for categories which are different for public address question periods. The categories of a similar nature include: 1. increases anxiety and stress; 2. time; 3. question problems. Additional categories of disadvantages include:

4. No disadvantages. Comments in this category simply indicated the contestant believed there were no disadvantages with the Judge questioning process.
5. Judging superiority complex. Contestants were concerned with their knowledge of the subject matter. For example,

"spiteful questions thrown out just to upset and display superiority," and "judges using the time for personal attacks."

6. Limiting of evidence. One speaker was concerned judge scrutiny might lead the contestant to use less evidence: "in impromptu, people tend to use examples with which they are only marginally familiar--the threat of questions may discourage them from using that evidence therefore limiting the types of evidence used. Being able to draw on knowledge seems to be one of the most important skills--limiting that pool of knowledge seems to be a problem."

Conclusions

A few obvious conclusion may be drawn from this study. First, students believe judges ought to be allowed to ask questions of final round competitors. Second, this experience ought to be offered at invitational meets as well as national competitions, and, finally, the practice ought to encompass oral interpretation and public address events.

A more striking conclusion is that the forensics community ought to listen to its most important members--the students. Although coaches/forensic educators may have a stronger voice and, for whatever reasons, may not like the

idea of judge questioning, it stands to reason students ought to have greater input in the decision making process.

However, the disadvantages of judge questioning need to be addressed. The establishment of a set of standards and guidelines would make it possible to diminish the "question problems" and "judge superiority" problems articulated by the students. While tournaments will have to build in more time for questions during final rounds, and tournaments may go longer as a result, we found questioning added no more than half an hour to the tournament. Finally, once students get accustomed to the process, the anxiety and stress may diminish or be used to their advantage.

While this study provides conclusive evidence students approve of judge questioning, there was one limitation which should be noted. The sample size is small, given data was only collected at one invitational tournament. However, perhaps this study will provide an impetus for others to experiment with and survey additional students, which will then confirm or deny the results of this study.

One student stated, "there are questions on ballots I never get to answer." This study allowed this student to express an opinion and to have it shared with members of the forensic community. Rarely are student competitors given this chance. We listen to students in rounds, now it is time to start listening to them outside rounds.

Endnotes

[1] Historical information concerning the NFA and the questioning process was confirmed by Dr. Christina Reynolds, NFA executive secretary.

[2] David Levasseur and Kevin Dean address the implications of this decision and need for questioning in rhetorical criticism in the fall 1989 National Forensic Journal.

[3] The development of the categories in this study followed Berelson's (1952) definition of "what is said," specifically a subject-matter orientation.

[4] Results of Cohen's Kappa is based on the guidelines provided by J. R. Landis and G. G. Koch.

References

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Table 1

Questioning by Judges in Final Rounds

	Public Address	Oral Interpretation	Total
All Judges	17	10	27
'Some Judges	9	11	20
No Response	3	2	5
Total	29	23	52

Table 2

Asking Questions in Rounds

	Public Address	Oral Interpretation	Total
Preliminary			
Yes	7	3	10
No	17	19	36
No Response	5	1	6
Total	29	23	52
x^2	4.16	11.7	13.69
Final			
Yes	20	17	37
No	6	5	11
No Response	3	1	4
Total	29	23	52
x^2	7.52	6.30	13.30

Table 3

Asking Questions at Invitationals/Nationals

	Public Address	Oral Interpretation	Total
Invitationals			
Yes	20	14	34
No	6	7	13
No Response	3	2	5
Total	29	23	52
χ^2	7.52	2.17*	8.96
Nationals			
Yes	21	12	33
No	5	8	13
No Response	3	3	6
Total	29	23	52
χ^2	9.84	1.08*	8.38

* Not significant at the .05 level.